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ABSTRACT

In some educational systems, legislative action mandates teacher participation in decision making through the formation of policymaking bodies such as school councils. This paper presents findings of a study that investigated high school teachers' perceptions of empowerment in schools with and without school councils. The study investigated Kentucky high school teachers' perceptions of some dimensions of empowerment at various stages of school-council implementation. The Kentucky Education Reform Act mandated that schools could initiate school-based decision making, and that all schools would have councils in place by 1996. Data were gathered through a survey that elicited responses from teachers in 93 out of 120 schools, an almost 80 percent response rate. Teachers' years of experience with councils served as the independent variable and six School Participation Empowerment Scale (SPES) subscales--decision making, status, professional growth, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact--were the dependent variables. Teachers in schools with councils (1, 2, or 3 years) reported more involvement in decision making than did teachers in schools without councils. However, there were no significant differences for the remaining five dependent variables. The data have two implications: (1) Policymakers may be able to mandate a flattening of district systems with the intent to empower teachers; however, teachers may continue to perceive their role as carrying out orders; and (2) Teachers need to be motivated to contribute to the collective school effort. Five tables are included. (Contains 43 references.) (LMI)

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SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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RUNNING HEAD: SBDM and Empowerment

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SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Wood (1994) suggested that classroom teachers are one of the best resources for change because they understand the systemic problems in public education. His statement suggested that they be involved in the decision-making process as it may enhance the desired transformations. Essentially this is empowering teachers to make decisions in local schools. In some educational programs, legislative action (state or local) mandates participation through the formation of policy-making bodies such as school councils. This raises the question of how teachers perceive their participation in decision making when policies require their involvement. Consequently, this study investigates high school teachers' perceptions of empowerment in schools with and without councils in a reform state.

School-Based Decision Making

Developers of school-based decision making (SBDM) designed the system to improve education by empowering the actors to identify and solve problems. This concept is supported in a joint publication by the American Association of School Administrators, the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (1988). These organizations stated school-based management is based on two fundamental beliefs:

1. Those most closely affected by decisions should play a significant role in making the decisions; and,

2. Educational reform efforts will be most effective and long-lasting when carried out by people who feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for the process (p.6).

Researchers have documented many benefits associated with this type of governance structure. Some have suggested that better decisions are made with the SBDM process (Logan,1992; Neal,1988) and teachers experience higher levels of job satisfaction (Teague,1991). Others have underscored the positive impact SBDM has had on school climate (Love,1994; Collins and Hanson,1991; Smith et al.,1991) and staff morale (Malen et al.,1989; White,1989).

On the other hand, not all the research on SBDM has been positive. Some researchers have suggested that contrary to feeling empowered, many teachers found their time bound up with committees struggling with decisions that had little to do with instruction (Lichtenstein et al.,1991; Malen et al.,1990; Weiss et al.,1991). Research has suggested that oftentimes the process was slow, difficult, and time consuming (Johnson,1993; Lindquest and Muriel,1989). Furthermore, many problems have been associated with attempts to implement SBDM(Wohlstetter,1995; Gomez,1989). In their summary, Wohlstetter and Buffett (1992) suggested the rhetoric surrounding SBDM has often been greater than its substance.

Empowerment

The issue of empowerment is a common theme among various types of organizations. A substantial body of literature on employee empowerment has been written in business

publications and management journals (Crosby, 1988; Juran, 1988; Taguchi, 1986; Ishikawa, 1985; Feigenbaum, 1983; Peters, 1982). The rationale behind the empowerment of employees has been for companies to cut costs and compete in a global economy by organizing employees in work teams empowered to solve problems and make decisions that were previously the sole domain of management. In addition, many have begun to examine empowering issues in the school setting (Short, Greer, and Michael, 1991; Maeroff, 1988; Lightfoot, 1986). Glickman (1990) spoke of empowerment as the banner word of the current restructuring movement in our public schools.

While empowerment has become a popular theme in various organizations, the definitions and meanings of the term are often diverse and ambiguous. However, within the educational setting, recurring themes have been identified. These include decision making (Marburger, 1980; McKenzie, 1989), autonomy (Lightfoot, 1986; Prawat, 1991), and professionalization (Maeroff, 1988; Brandt, 1989; Bolin, 1989). Others have suggested that status (Maeroff, 1988), impact (Rinehart and Short, 1991) and self-efficacy (Goodlad, 1984; Ashby, 1989) are related to empowerment.

State Reform Act

A massive reform act has been undertaken in a southeastern state that includes the two ideals of school-based decision making and empowerment. It was mandated that schools could initiate SBDM; but by 1996, all schools would have a council in place. These conditions created a unique opportunity to study organizational outcomes (teacher empowerment) of school

councils within a state where schools were to implement school-based decision making (councils) over a six year period of time.

The composition of the council includes three elected teachers, two elected parents, and the principal. With teachers representing a majority on the school councils, the Act has empowered the council with authority to make important decisions related to the school in eight key areas. In addition, council members and the principal take part in a training that teaches them to develop a network of committees to involve the faculty in decision making. These conditions make it possible to study teacher participation in schools with traditional governance structure and with school councils.

Purpose

Various reformers have extended the meaning of empowerment; subsequently, it has several dimensions. This theme of empowerment underlies the major school improvement efforts; consequently, teachers in schools with councils should perceive, in addition to decision making, other aspects of participation. Even though a basic tenet for establishing school councils was to increase the involvement of teachers in the decision-making process, teachers should also sense autonomy, status, and impact from being involved and observing improved teaching practices and learning outcomes.

In addition to decision making, autonomy, status, and impact, this state's legislature also increased professional development guidelines requiring teachers to attend workshops (conferences, etc.) which would provide training for teachers in decision making, curriculum,

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instruction, and other skills needed for the change effort. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the perception of some dimensions of empowerment by high school teachers at various stages of school council implementation.

Methodology

Population and Sample

The legislature in a southeastern state mandated a statewide reform act requiring districts to decentralize decision making for certain policy areas to newly formed school councils. By law, each institution identified one school to begin the process during the 1990-91 year; and, during the same term, allowed teachers from other buildings, if they desired, to vote on the formation of a council. During the succeeding four years, teachers in other schools successfully exercised their right to vote on the formation of a council. Consequently, by the Fall of 1994, councils existed in high schools for either zero, one, two, or three years.

Given that councils existed during a four year period, it was possible to stratify high schools according to the time (0, 1, 2, or 3 years) their policy-making body existed. Using random selection, the 30 sites chosen from each classification made a total sample size of 120 schools. Principals in these schools received a phone call from the researcher to request their faculty's participation in the study. Most (117 of 120) agreed to cooperate; subsequently, 93 principals persuaded their faculties to respond for a 79.5% return rate.

The teachers' average age was 40.7 and their mean number of years teaching experience was 14.6 (see Table 1). Nearly 60% of the teachers were female although both sexes were evenly distributed over the levels of the independent variable (as illustrated in Table 2). These

teachers were mainly from rural areas (72%) and they served on more school committees than council committees (60.6% to 8.8%).

Instrumentation

Teachers received the School Participation Empowerment Scale (SPES), developed by Short and Rinehart (1992), and a demographic form. The SPES was a 38-item measure with an internal consistency estimate of .94 (Cronback's Alpha) and it consisted of six subscales. Labels for these subscales (Cronback's Alpha in parenthesis) were: decision making (.89), status (.83), professional growth (.86), self-efficacy (.84), autonomy (.81), and impact (.82).

The teachers responded to the demographics form by providing the following information: years of teaching experience, age, gender, year's service as a council member, and years experience on school committees. For each school, data obtained from the State Department of Education indicated the student population and the number of years (0, 1, 2, or 3) since adopting a council.

Procedures

To improve the return rate, principals received a phone call from the researcher requesting their assistance to conduct the study. If the principal agreed to participate, they received a letter confirming the agreement to present the forms to their faculty; and, the postal delivery also contained a packet for each faculty member. These individual packages contained a cover letter, a demographic questionnaire, the SPES items and a stamped-addressed envelope.

The teachers' cover letter gave instructions on how to complete and return the completed questionnaire. This message continued by indicating that their responses were confidential and anonymous. Finally, the letter stated that published reports used descriptive and inferential

statistics, thus, individual responses remained confidential.

Analysis and Results

In this quasi-experimental study, year's experience with a council (0, 1, 2, 3) served as the independent variable and the six SPES subscales as the dependent variables. The calculations for each dependent measure across the levels of the independent variable yielded the means and standard deviations in Table 3. To test these means for significant differences a MANOVA analysis (see Table 4) was used and resulted in a significant Wilks lambda of .67 [F(18,238)=2.02, p=.01]. Consequently, the follow-up ANOVA technique (see Table 4) was used and resulted in a significant statistic for decision making [F(3,89)=3.57, p=.02]; however, no differences existed on the remaining 5 subscales (professional growth, impact, status, autonomy, and self-efficacy). The comparison of the decision-making averages indicated that teachers from schools with three year old councils (mean = 3.05, s.d. = .77) perceived more involvement than teachers in schools with no council experience (mean=2.88, sd=.70).

Transforming (dividing by the number of items in each dimension) the composite means (regardless of level of experience) to the Likert-type scale resulted in outcomes that were at least 3 or greater (see Table 5). Anchors associated with these points were neutral, agree, or strongly agree. This observation may suggest that teachers perceived being empowered, but it may be due to factors other than that of working in a school with a council.

Discussion

Many reform efforts enlist the support and involvement of teachers to make meaningful

change. These endeavors are often termed empowerment which is a construct that can be operationalized and measured. Evidence exists that indicates empowerment includes estimates of decision making, autonomy, professional development, status, self-efficacy, and impact. This study investigated one state's attempt to immerse teachers in the governance process, especially as it related to curriculum and assessment, by gathering the perceptions of high school teachers in schools with and without councils.

Findings from the multivariate analysis indicated that teachers in schools with 3-year old councils (mean = 3.05, sd = .77) perceive more involvement in decision making than those in schools without councils (mean = 2.88, sd = .70). At first glance, this suggests that mandated school councils are having their effect; however, neither mean denotes teachers' agreement with involvement in decision making (1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, and 3=neutral, etc.). Interpretation of those means suggests that these high school teachers do not perceive a focus on decision making in their work environment. This observation may indicate a lack of involvement in meaningful resolutions that relate directly to student achievement (Conley and Bacharach, 1990; Sharp, 1992). That is, these teachers may want to be implicated in choosing alternatives for curriculum improvements and instructional strategies.

No significant differences were reported for another dimension of empowerment, autonomy, between teachers in schools with or without councils (1, 2, or 3 years). In fact, the composite mean for all groups was approximately 3.4 indicating these teachers experienced moderate feelings of autonomy (see Table 5). This may be due to the mandates to implement councils and develop new assessment practices as well as new curricular and teaching strategies. In other words, teachers may not be taking ownership for the reforms because they did not

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formulate the ideas nor the way to implement these innovations.

There were no significant differences for the remaining four subscales (professional development, status, impact, and self-efficacy) between schools with and without councils. The lack of a significant difference for professional development was not surprising as this state allowed school districts 5 additional days (beyond the original 4) of training per year for 1992-96; however, it was revealing that these teachers did not rate this measure higher (i.e., close to 5 or strongly agree) than they did (see Table 3 and 5). Perhaps they only chose the anchor agree because they do not sense freedom to choose the activities they wanted or needed to implement new curriculum and instructional strategies.

The means for impact, self-efficacy, and status were slightly over 4.0 indicating agreement with those empowering constructs; however, there were no significant differences between schools with and without councils. These positive perceptions by teachers for self-efficacy and impact offer promise for students and their achievement. High ratings on these constructs indicate that teachers believe they can and are influencing students' learning. Additionally, finding a high mean for status indicated they sense recognition for their efforts.

Interestingly, this study found no significant differences between schools with and without school councils in five of the six subscales of empowerment. Proponents of SBDM might find these results disturbing. The question then becomes why did teachers in SBDM schools fail to perceive more empowerment than those teachers in schools without councils? One possible explanation for these results might be that principals are still exercising authoritarian control over decisions (Wohstetter, 1995; Malen et al., 1990). In this type of environment, teachers may not have challenged the position of the principal, and therefore it would be highly

unlikely that they feel empowered by the SBDM process.

In addition, some researchers have suggested that teachers only seek greater influence over operational classroom decisions, not over strategic organizational decisions that deal with matters outside the realm of the classroom (Sharp, 1992; Conley and Bacharack, 1990). Councils oftentimes seem to get bogged down with mundane issues that appear to have little to do with classroom instruction and student learning. Furthermore, teachers in schools without councils may have felt they already had input into operational classroom decisions that directly affected them. Perhaps they felt they were already involved in decisions that really mattered to them, without the need to vote to implement a council prior to the date all schools must adopt a council unless exempted.

These findings need to be interpreted in the context of all of this state's educational mandates. It appears that school councils may not be empowering to all teachers, however, it may have served a purpose by flattening the districts' bureaucracy. Unfortunately, for the teachers, it may be that the mandates curtailed their sense of real involvement in change leaving them with only the task of working out the implementation details. Finally, this state's push for high stakes student assessment may influence their perceptions. High school teachers may not discern responsibility for decision making and autonomy, but do realize that they must increase student achievement to reach thresholds and avoid sanctions.

It should be noted that this study solicited teachers' perceptions of empowerment only after a maximum of three years experience with school councils. Many researchers have indicated that five to 10 years are needed for significant change to result from innovations such as site-based decision making (David, 1989; Casner-Lotto, 1988; Wissler & Ortiz, 1986). It may

be that this state is still in the infancy of implementing many of the mandates including immersing teachers in decision making.

Implications

There appear to be two implications from this study. First, policy makers may be able to mandate a flattening of district systems with the intent to empower teachers; however, teachers may still only perceive their role as carrying out orders. Teachers want to be involved in decisions that concern their work; namely, designing innovations that directly relate to classrooms and student learning.

Secondly, teachers need to be motivated to contribute to the mission or collective effort of the school. Shamir (1990) indicated that teachers need to believe that they can contribute to the faculties' efforts to improve collective performance or to implement change; while, concurrently, maintaining their own identity. Results from this study indicated that these high school teachers believed they were having an impact; however, meaningful input into decision making appears to be lacking.

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Table 1

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Student Population	839.0	438.5	123	2108
Years Teaching Experience	14.6	9.3	0	45
Age	40.7	9.8	22	69

Table 2

Governance Structure	Gender		Setting			Service			
						Council Committee		KERA Committee	
	Male	Female	Rural	Suburban	Urban	Yes	No	Yes	No
No Experience	236 36.8%	367 57.2%	12 57.1%	6 28.6%	3 4.3%	0.0 0.0%	611 100%	406 33.3%	814 66.7%
One-year Experience	193 36.9%	318 60.8%	18 85.7%	2 9.5%	1 4.8%	140 13.6%	884 86.4%	662 64.5%	364 35.5%
Two-year Experience	221 34.9%	378 59.6%	16 64%	7 28.0%	2 8.0%	169 14.0%	1036 86.0%	880 70.7%	364 29.3%
Three-year Experience	219 35.5%	391 59.4%	21 80.8%	3 19.4%	2 7.8%	222 19.2%	932 80.8%	898 72.0%	308 28.0%
TOTALS	869 35.5%	1454 59.4%	67 72.0%	18 19.4%	8 8.6%	525 8.8%	3463 91.2%	2846 60.6%	1850 39.4%

Table 3

Number of schools, means, and standard deviations (in parenthesis) for decision making, professional growth, autonomy, status, impact, and self-efficacy.

Dependent Measures	Years Experience with School Councils			
	O years (N=21)	One year (N=21)	Two years (N=25)	Three years (N=26)
Decision Making	2.88 (.70)	2.92 (.71)	2.91 (.68)	3.05 (.77)
Professional Growth	3.95 (.64)	3.90 (.66)	3.73 (.70)	3.88 (.66)
Status	4.16 (.53)	4.15 (.53)	4.11 (.50)	4.14 (.51)
Self- Efficacy	4.10 (.54)	4.12 (.86)	4.04 (.57)	4.09 (.57)
Autonomy	3.36 (.72)	3.33 (.76)	3.33 (.72)	3.44 (.75)
Impact	4.03 (.55)	4.01 (.56)	3.97 (.58)	4.02 (.57)

Table 4
Univariate and multivariate F-Ratios for dependent variables of decision making, professional growth, status, autonomy, impact, and self-efficacy.

Decision Making

Source	df	ss	F-value	Probability
SBDM Experience	3	76.28	3.57	.02
Error	89	633.33		

Professional Growth

Source	df	ss	F-value	Probability
SBDM Experience	3	13.35	1.52	.21
Error	89	258.97		

Status

Source	df	ss	F-value	Probability
SBDM Experience	3	1.00	.49	.69
Error	89	61.07		

Self-Efficacy

Source	df	ss	F-value	Probability
SBDM Experience	3	4.63	1.76	.16
Error	89	78.11		

Autonomy

Source	df	ss	F-value	Probability
SBDM Experience	3	5.58	1.73	.17
Error	89	95.41		

Impact

Source	df	ss	F-value	Probability
SBDM Experience	3	1.77	.63	.59
Error	89	82.57		

Multivariate Test of No Overall Effect

Source	F-Value	Probability
SBDM Experience	2.02	.01

Table 5

Grand means for teaching regardless of experience with school councils.

Dependent Measures	Mean	Standard Deviation
Decision Making	2.94	(.72)
Professional Growth	3.86	(.67)
Status	4.14	(.51)
Self-Efficacy	4.08	(.56)
Autonomy	3.37	(.74)
Impact	4.01	(.56)